

Teaching expository text structures through information trade book retellings

Teachers can help students understand common expository text structures by having them retell information trade books.

During the past few years, teachers at all grade levels have become increasingly interested in developing student understanding of expository text. At least two factors have helped to drive this interest. First, teachers are well aware of the demands of living in an era when information is increasing at an alarming rate. They recognize that if today's students are to survive in the Information Age, they must develop greater familiarity with and understanding of expository text.

Second, mounting pressures for improved student standardized test performance have resulted in increased attention to exposition. Because 70–80% of standardized reading test content is expository (Daniels, 2002), it is essential to provide students with the tools necessary to develop understanding of this type of text.

Teachers, too, are discovering that the proliferation of excellent children's informational literature available today can provide a vehicle for teaching children about exposition. The authors of these books are experienced in making the most complex concepts comprehensible, and children have the opportunity to explore the real world through texts that are inviting, accurate, and accessible. Today's information books contain wonderful examples of well-written exposition and are ideal for exposing even the youngest children to common expository text structures such as descrip-

tion, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution.

While most teachers are very familiar with the power of narrative retellings to improve student comprehension, they are less experienced with expository retellings. Involving students in retelling information trade books represents a promising means not only for engaging students with outstanding literature but also for improving their understanding of expository text. This article describes how teachers can use information trade book retellings to improve student comprehension of expository text structures. First, I provide background information about retellings, expository text structure and teaching these text patterns through information trade books. In the second part of the article, I describe instructional strategies and procedures for teaching the various text structures through large-group, small-group, and paired retellings. In the final section of the article, I describe how teachers can assess individual student retellings.

Why teach about expository text?

Educators today are reexamining questions of what it means to be literate in the Information Age. Few would argue against the fact that technology is dramatically changing the way we live, and that the Internet, websites, e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, and other forms of communication have changed our views about what it means to be literate (Reinking, 1998). It is clear that the literacy demands of today's technological society require that

students be able to read and write not only in the print world but also in the digital world (Schmar-Dobler, 2003).

The Internet arguably represents one of the most demanding forms of technology in terms of its literacy requirements. The ability to use the Internet to access information quickly, sift through volumes of text, evaluate content, and synthesize information from a variety of sources is central to success at school and in the workplace (Schmar-Dobler, 2003). All of these skills, however, require that students capably read the text found on Internet websites, most of which is expository (Kamil & Lane, 1997). For this reason, it is imperative that even young children begin to develop understanding of this text type.

For many years, experts assumed that children's ability to understand narrative text preceded the ability to comprehend exposition. Pappas's (1991) seminal study comparing 20 kindergartners' ability to retell information trade books with a fictional one called that assumption into question. She found that the children she studied were just as capable of retelling informational text as narrative. Even so, children have far less familiarity with expository texts and their underlying structures (Chambliss, 1995; Goldman, 1997) than with narrative. Knowledge of the structure of different text genres develops over time for children; older children have greater understanding of different text types than younger children (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000). Despite this fact, students of all ages generally find reading expository text more difficult than reading narrative text (Langer, 1985).

There are at least two possible reasons for students' difficulty with this type of text. First, young children lack early exposure to exposition. Story continues to be the predominant genre in early elementary classrooms. Duke (2000), for example, found that very little informational text was available in the first-grade classrooms she studied, whether displayed on walls or in classroom libraries. Most important was that she found that students in these classrooms spent on average only 3.6 minutes with informational text per day.

The second possible reason is that in many cases students have not been taught how to read expository text. Children need more than exposure to informational texts; they need instruction that familiarizes them with its organization and structure.

In a study involving more than 100 hours of observations in primary literacy classrooms, Fisher and Hiebert (1990) found there was not a single instance of teachers modeling strategies for reading expository text. Teaching common expository text structures such as description, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution facilitates reading and writing of exposition (Block, 1993; Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; McGee & Richgels, 1985; Raphael, Kirschner, & Englert, 1988). Students who learn to use the organization and structure of informational texts are better able to comprehend and retain the information found in them (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Pearson & Duke, 2002).

If today's students are to meet the literacy demands of the future, they need to engage in authentic literacy tasks with expository texts. Information trade book retellings can provide students rich opportunities for not only gaining exposure to expository text but also gaining expertise in understanding this text type.

What are retellings?

Teachers and students often confuse retellings with summaries. Retellings are oral or written postreading recalls during which children relate what they remember from reading or listening to a particular text. Conversely, a summary represents a short, to-the-point distillation of the main ideas in the text. Retellings provide a holistic representation of student understanding rather than the fragmented information provided by answering comprehension questions (Bromley, 1998). When students retell, they attempt to recall as much of the information in the text as possible, not just the main points. Retellings are an important precursor to helping students develop summarization skills, both oral and written. Students who are unable to retell will find it difficult, if not impossible, to summarize effectively. As students gain facility in retelling in the early grades, their recounts of expository texts will become increasingly sophisticated. Through these experiences they will be well prepared to develop skills in summarizing as they move beyond the primary grades.

Research (Gambrell, Koskinen, & Kapinus, 1991; Gambrell, Pfeiffer, & Wilson, 1985; Morrow,

1986) clearly supports the usefulness of retellings in improving student understanding of story. Reconstructing texts through retellings helps children develop reading flexibility as well as knowledge of text forms, text conventions, and the processes involved in text construction. Retellings provide insights about children's ways of constructing meaning from texts and their ability to organize information. When students share retellings, they "read, reread and reread again" and engage with text much more intensely than at other times (Brown & Cambourne, 1990, p. 11). In addition, retellings let teachers see *how* as well as *how much* information children retain after reading or listening to a text (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983).

By retelling the expository text in information trade books, students can sense text organization and identify relationships among pieces of information and develop their oral language abilities. English-language learners may particularly benefit from this strategy, because the concrete nature of informational text can help them build bridges between their first and second languages. Through oral retellings of information trade books, children can develop deeper understanding of the forms and functions of exposition—a critical component to comprehending nonnarrative material.

Understanding expository text structures

Authors use different "tools" as they construct stories and information texts. Most of the time, stories are written in a narrative form, while information books are written in an expository one. Narrative and expository texts have different purposes. The main purpose of narrative texts is to tell a story, while expository text is intended to inform, describe, or report. Authors who create people and events from their imaginations use narrative structures to create stories. When authors write information books, they conduct research to gain information on the topic at hand. They organize the information as logically and interestingly as they can using various expository text structures.

Narrative texts have a specific, predictable structure that readers encounter over and over again. This structure, or story grammar, includes characters; a setting; a problem (or conflict); a cli-

max, or high point to the action; and a resolution. Expository texts, like narrative ones, have their own structures. These structures provide students with a map that guides them through a text. The greater children's awareness of expository text structures and organizational patterns, the better they can follow the author's message.

The five most common expository text structures include description, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution (Meyer, 1985). Signal words (or cue words) alert readers to the presence of these patterns. Often, however, signal words are implied rather than stated. Figure 1 describes each of these text structures and their characteristics.

Information trade books that reflect expository text patterns

Today's information trade books are ideally suited for teaching expository text structures because, unlike textbooks, they contain well-organized and clearly written texts. Books used for this purpose should, however, be selected with care. First and foremost, texts should be selected on the basis of literary quality. Information books should be well written, accurate in terms of content and illustration, and appropriate to the age level of the child. They should not simply be "baskets of facts" but should be written in an engaging and appealing way. Second, teachers must choose books that don't overwhelm children with difficult technical vocabulary and numerous complex concepts. The best informational books make even the most difficult terms and concepts comprehensible to children. Finally, teachers need to select books that clearly illustrate the text structure being taught. In many information trade books signal words are implied rather than explicitly stated. If this is the case, teachers should choose books with page layouts, headings, and tables of contents that provide students with important clues about the pattern used.

Expository text structures work on two different levels. In books for younger children, these text patterns may provide the macrostructure, or overall structure for a particular book. Titles like *Amazing Snakes* (Parsons, 1990), for example, use a descriptive structure to teach children about different types of snakes.

FIGURE 1
Common expository text structures

- **Description** presents a topic and provides details that help readers understand characteristics of a person, place, thing, topic, or idea. No specific signal words are typically associated with description. When authors delineate a topic they use description. Semantic maps (a graphic organizer that resembles a spider web and groups information by categories) provide a visual representation for this structure.

Trade book examples: *Bats* by Gail Gibbons, *Amazing Snakes* by Richard Parsons, and *Ant Cities* by Arthur Dorros

- The **sequence** structure involves putting facts, events, or concepts in their order of occurrence. Signal words like *first, second, third, then, next, last, before, after, and finally* indicate order of events. Authors use sequence when giving directions for an experiment or explaining the stages in an animal's life cycle. Series of events chains are visual organizers that use boxes and arrows to illustrate a sequence of events and the steps in that sequence.

Trade book examples: *My Puppy Is Born* by Joanna Cole, *How Kittens Grow* by Millicent Selsam, and *The Buck Stops Here* by Alice Provensen

- The **comparison and contrast** structure involves identification of similarities and differences between facts, concepts, people, and so forth. Signal words include *same as, alike, similar to, resembles, compared to, different from, unlike, but, and yet*. Authors use this structure to compare and contrast crocodiles and alligators or life in ancient times with life today. Venn diagrams use interlocking circles to illustrate similarities and differences between two things. Individual characteristics appear in the left and right sections, while common characteristics appear in the overlapping sections.

Trade book examples: *Fire, Fire* by Gail Gibbons, *Gator or Croc* by Allan Fowler, and *Outside and Inside You* by Sandra Markle

- The **cause and effect** structure includes a description of causes and the resulting effects. Cause and effect is often signaled by *if, so, so that, because of, as a result of, since, in order to, and the words cause and effect*. When authors explain the effects of an oil spill or the reasons for animal extinction they use this structure. Cause and effect maps use circles or squares with connecting arrows to illustrate relationships between causes and their resulting effects.

Trade book examples: *What Makes Day and Night?* by Franklyn Bramley, *What Happens to a Hamburger?* by Paul Showers, *How Do Apples Grow?* by Giulio Maestro

- The **problem and solution** structure shows the development of a problem and its solution. Signal words include *problem, solution, because, cause, since, as a result, and so that*. Authors use this structure to explain why inventions are created, why money was invented, or why you should buy a particular product. Problem and solution outlines visually illustrate the problem-solving process by defining components of a problem and possible solutions.

Trade book examples: *A River Ran Wild: An Environmental History* by Lynn Cherry, *Cars and How They Go* by Joanna Cole, and *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine

At the microstructure, or paragraph level, however, authors may use many, or even all, of these structures within a given book or chapter, or even on a single page. Teachers might, then, select portions of text from such titles to illustrate particular text structures. Not every expository text uses these structures; some combine structures or incorporate features of narrative as well as exposition. As students increase their understanding, they can begin to identify texts illustrating a variety of structures, such as their textbooks. Figure 1 provides examples of high-quality information trade books illustrative of each type of text structure at the macrolevel.

Introducing text structures through trade books

The teaching of expository text structures can begin as early as kindergarten and become increasingly sophisticated as students move through the grades. Each text structure should be taught individually; students need time to master one structure before learning another. Structures like sequence and comparison and contrast tend to be easier for students to grasp, while description, cause and effect, and problem and solution are more challenging. Figure 2 offers a clear sequence

FIGURE 2
Sequence for teaching expository text structures

1. Introduce the organizational pattern.
2. Explain the pattern and when writers use it. Point out the signal words associated with the structure and share an example.
3. Model ways students can determine text structures when signal words are not used. The table of contents and headings can help in this area.
4. Introduce a graphic organizer for the pattern.
5. Read aloud a trade book or a section of a book illustrating the appropriate text structure. Ask students to listen for signal words that can help them identify the structure.
6. Using the overhead projector, involve the group in completing a graphic organizer illustrating the text type.
7. Ask students to work in pairs to locate examples of the structure in information trade books. They can search for examples of the signal words, as well as use headings and other text features to guide their search.
8. Have students diagram these structures using a graphic organizer.

Note. Adapted from Tompkins (2002).

for teaching expository text structures through minilessons.

Teacher Alan Page wanted to teach his sixth graders the problem and solution text structure. His students were studying endangered animals. He introduced them to the problem and solution structure by asking, "What can we do to prevent endangered animals from disappearing from the planet?" Students then brainstormed solutions to the problem. After that, Alan explained that authors may use the problem and solution pattern when discussing world problems, scientific inventions, and so on. He pointed out the signal words often used with this pattern. At this point, he presented the following paragraph from *Ospreys* (Patent, 1993) on the overhead projector. He read the paragraph aloud and asked students to note signal words that could indicate this pattern. He then underlined the

words "solve this problem" to emphasize their usefulness in identifying the pattern.

In some areas ospreys have become pests by nesting on power poles. Their large nests can damage the wires. Or even worse, the birds can touch their wings to two wires at once, killing themselves and shorting out the power. Some companies solve this problem by putting up spiked poles where the birds can't nest. (p. 53)

He then distributed copies of the problem and solution outline. Students worked together to complete the outline (see Figure 3). Students later searched for examples of this pattern on selected pages of their science text.

Teaching the retelling process

After students understand a particular text structure, experience retelling texts that illustrate

FIGURE 3
Problem and solution outline for *Ospreys* (Patent, 1993)

Problem

Who has the problem? The osprey.

What was the problem? They nest on power poles.

Why was it a problem? Their nests can damage the wires. Sometimes the birds touch their wings to the wires and kill themselves and short out the power.

Solution

Some companies put up spiked poles where birds can't nest.

that structure can provide understanding of how these texts are constructed. A two-phase sequence can facilitate student development of expository retelling skills. During Phase 1, teachers need to model the retelling process. During Phase 2, students need opportunities to practice retellings, in small groups or pairs.

Phase 1: Teacher modeling of retellings

Because expository text may be unfamiliar to students, teacher modeling is a critical first step in involving students in expository retellings. Teachers need to provide extensive scaffolding for students as they develop understanding of the process. Teachers should model retelling books with structures like sequence or comparison and contrast first and then gradually move to more complex structures such as cause and effect. With younger children it is best to model the retelling process using a read-aloud; older students may read the text silently.

Step 1: Before reading a text, develop links between children's experiences and the text itself. Use prereading activities designed to activate prior knowledge and stimulate thinking about the content of the book, such as KWL (what I *know*, what I *want* to know, what I *learned*), brainstorming, or problem solving. Make book concepts more concrete by using props, pictures, or actual examples of things mentioned in the story.

Step 2: During reading of the text, point out specific text features that facilitate retelling, such as signal words, the table of contents, headings, bolded words, maps, charts, or diagrams. Instruct students to read or listen carefully to remember as much about the text as they can.

Step 3: After reading, retell the text as completely as possible. Ask students to add any missing information, and model "look backs" by rereading or directing students to reread particular sections of the text that might have been missed during the retelling.

Step 4: Model more "embellished" retellings by including analogies, personal anecdotes, and imagery (Wood & Jones, 1998). This demonstrates to students that making the text their own is not only acceptable but desirable.

Phase 2: Students practice retelling

After students understand the concept of retelling, they need opportunities to practice. Involvement in large-group retellings allows students to experience the process again with peer

support. Once students are comfortable with large-group retellings, they can begin to retell in pairs or small groups. To begin using large-group retellings, the following sequence may be useful:

Step 1: Involve students in before reading activities (see Step 1 of Phase 1) and then read the text aloud or ask students to read it. Encourage students to predict what the text might be about and to think about what the organization pattern of the text might be by previewing the text or the table of contents.

Step 2: Ask students what they can remember about the text. Record their responses on the whiteboard. Provide scaffolds and prompts that aid student recall, such as pictures from the text or questions such as the following: What did you find out first? What did you find out next? What did you learn after that?

Step 3: Reread the text or ask students to reread the text and encourage them to identify information missed during the first retelling. Add this information to what has already been recorded on the whiteboard.

Step 4: Encourage students to make personal connections between their lives and the text. Record these on the whiteboard as appropriate.

After reading *How Kittens Grow* (Selsam & Buble, 1973), a sequential text, aloud to her first graders, teacher Andrea Craig engaged her class in a large-group retelling. To prompt students as they retold for the first time, she mounted key photographs from the text onto the whiteboard. She also prompted the students by asking questions like "What did we find out first about kittens? What did we find out after that?" and so on, modeling important signal words associated with a sequential structure. After students retold, Andrea reread the text, and the students filled the gaps in their retelling by noting details they neglected the first time.

Once students have experience with large-group retellings, they can move to small-group or paired retelling. These smaller groups can provide students with more independent retelling experiences but still give them some degree of peer support. Cumulative retellings (Hoyt, 1999) are ideal for small-group retelling practice. After reading a text, the first student in the group retells the first events from the story. The second student retells the next series of events but repeats the earlier events. The third student relates the events provided by the first two and then adds the next set of events. The process continues until the entire text has been retold.

FIGURE 4
Series of events chain for *Mummies, Tombs, and Treasures* (Perl, 1987)

Event 1

The dead person was sent to be mummified.

Event 2

On the day of burial, a procession was formed starting at the house of the dead person. A new coffin was pulled on a wooden sled.

Event 3

Mourners and servants followed the coffin.

Event 4

The mummy was laid in its coffin.

Event 5

The procession continued into the foothills.

Event 6

At the tomb site, the mourners ate a funerary banquet.

Event 7

After the banquet, the mummy was sealed into its tomb.

After practice with group retellings, students can retell in pairs. Here are steps to follow for paired retellings:

Step 1: Ask students to select a trade book to read on their own silently or through paired reading. Remind them that they will want to remember the big ideas from the text as well as the details.

Step 2: Have students work in pairs to reconstruct the text. Each child in the pair can retell half of the text. One child can be identified as the reteller and one as the listener. They can then switch roles.

Step 3: Instruct students to listen carefully to one another as they retell. With older children, the listener can record the ideas recounted by the reteller.

Step 4: After each pair of students has retold, they can look back at the text and compare it with the ideas that have been recorded to identify information missed during their retelling.

To teach her students about the sequential text structure, fifth-grade teacher Maria Gomez involved her students in paired retellings of a section of *Mummies, Tombs, and Treasures* (Perl, 1987), dealing with the sequence of events in an ancient Egyptian funeral procession. Maria began the lesson by reviewing sequential text signal words. She then asked her students to read the text

silently. Following this, students completed a series of events chains in pairs (see Figure 4). After that, students retold the information from the text in pairs, relying on their series of events chains as needed.

Individual retellings and assessment

While the focus of this article has been on using retellings as an instructional strategy, individual retellings represent a powerful means of assessment. Rubrics like the one adapted from Irwin and Mitchell (1983) provide a framework for teacher evaluation of student retellings (see Figure 5). This scale provides for holistic evaluation of retellings not unlike that used for evaluating writing samples. The scoring method acknowledges the child's response as a whole, with all its individual, unique features and richness. Moreover, it assesses a student's ability to identify main ideas, relevant details, and overall text structure, along with the ability to infer beyond the text, summarize, and relate text information to his or her own life.

The following steps can guide teachers as they use individual retellings for assessment:

Step 1: Before beginning the retelling assessment, ask the student to predict what a book might be about based upon the title. Ask the child to read the book or read it to that child. Instruct the student to remember everything he or she has heard or read.

Step 2: Ask the child to tell you everything he or she can about what has been read. Use prompts such as "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What else do you remember?" to ensure that the student shares as much information as he or she can about the text without looking back at the book.

Step 3: At the end of the retelling, use follow-up questions to elicit additional information about the student's understanding. For example, assess ability to summarize by asking, "If you were going to tell a friend what this book was about in just a few words, what would you say?" To learn about personal responses to the book, ask, "What was the most important thing you learned from this book? How did you feel about this book? Why did you like or dislike it? Would you tell a friend to read it, and why or why not?"

Step 4: Encourage students to relate these texts to their own lives and schema.

FIGURE 5
Richness of retelling scale

Level	Criteria for establishing level
5	<i>Very cohesive and complete retelling.</i> Student includes all main ideas and supporting details, sequences material properly, infers beyond the text, relates text to own life, understands text organization, summarizes, gives opinion of text and justifies it, and may ask additional questions.
4	<i>Cohesive and complete retelling.</i> Student includes most main ideas and supporting details, sequences material properly, relates text to own life, understands text organization, summarizes, and gives opinion of text and justifies it.
3	<i>Fairly complete retelling.</i> Student includes some main ideas and details, correctly sequences most material, understands text organization, and gives opinion of text.
2	<i>Incomplete retelling.</i> Student includes a few main ideas and details, has some difficulty putting material in sequence, may give irrelevant information, and gives opinion of text.
1	<i>Very incomplete retelling.</i> Student gives details only, sequences material poorly, and gives irrelevant information.

Note. Adapted from Irwin & Mitchell (1983).

Students must draw connections between their own lives and the text in order to obtain higher scores on the rubric (see Figure 5). Students need to “personalize” their retellings by demonstrating their own interest in and questions about the text rather than by providing dry recitations of the facts. The following is an example of a fourth grader’s retelling of an excerpt from *Storms* (Simon, 1992) relating to hailstorms and downdrafts. The student obviously felt comfortable embellishing her retelling in ways that made it personal for her. This retelling clearly indicates that the student is connecting the text to her own life and experiences:

It talked about hailstones and how they can harm you and other animals. I think that’s pretty interesting, because they can kill chickens and rabbits and squirrels and I never knew that it could actually kill little animals. But if it hits you in the right way, it could kill you too. The hailstones are pretty interesting looking. They look like an onion. It’s shaped like an onion.... It also talks about downdrafts and how they could hurt people in airplanes and how airplanes could crash in seconds because the downdrafts are so heavy. So if you ever go on an airplane and know that there are downdrafts—don’t.

As this example indicates, it is possible for students to draw connections between expository text

information and their own lives in many of the same ways they connect narrative text to their own experiences. As their comfort level with exposition increases, students will find it easier to move beyond the recitation of facts to more meaningful retellings.

Capitalize on enthusiasm

Information trade book retellings can acquaint students with the expository text patterns most commonly found in their reading. By engaging students in retelling information trade books, teachers can capitalize on students’ enthusiasm for nonfiction literature while providing rich experiences for engagement with nonnarrative texts. Through carefully sequenced instruction involving introduction of each text pattern; teacher modeling; and the use of large-group, small-group, and paired retellings, teachers can ensure that students increase their familiarity with and understanding of expository text. In addition, careful assessment of information trade book retellings can provide teachers with valuable information about each student’s emerging abilities in comprehending nonnarrative text—an essential literacy skill for success in our technological world.

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